HOW WILL THE WORLD KNOW?

April 23, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35

"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." -John 13:35 (RSV)

For twenty-four weeks the book that has been at or near the top of the best seller list is All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten by Robert Fulghum, a sometimes clergyman, cowboy, I.B.M. salesman, bartender and artist. It is a collection of very simple reflections on this and that... The title essay, "All I Need to Know I Learned In Kindergarten," has been printed widely, and even read into the Congressional Record. To give credit where credit is due, I heard it first at a church staff meeting, two years ago, when Karen Maurer, our astute Director of Christian Education and the Day School, presented it to the full staff as her report.

Every spring, Robert Fulghum says he has set himself to the task of writing out his personal statement of belief, his credo. When he was younger, the statement was long, complicated, like a Supreme Court brief. But in recent years it has been growing shorter and simpler. Now he has it down to one page.

The inspiration for the project came from mistakenly filling his dilapidated car with super-deluxe, high-octane, high-performance gas and discovering the old car couldn't handle it, sputtered and belched and stalled. "My mind and spirit get like that from time to time," he explains. "Too much high-content information, and I get the existential willies. The examined life is no picnic. I realized that I already know most of what's necessary to live a meaningful life - that it isn't all that complicated... All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten - not in graduate school - but at the sandpile at Sunday School."

"Share everything.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life - learn some and think
some and draw and paint and sing and
dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out into the world, watch out
for traffic, hold hands, and stick
together.

Be aware of wonder. Remember the little
seed in the styrofoam cup: The roots go
down and the plant goes up and nobody really
knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even
the little seed in the styrofoam cup - they
all die. So do we.

And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and
the first word you learned - the biggest word
of all - LOOK."

Fulghum can't resist preaching a little at the end of his credo, but it's all right because what he preaches is true. "Think what a better world it would be if we all - the whole world - had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap... or if governments put things back where they found them and cleaned up their messes."

The enormous appeal and popularity of All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten is an expression, I believe, of deep impatience with the complexity of modernity. Life is complicated. It didn't seem to be so complex just a few decades ago, but it is today and it's getting worse. The longer we're at it the more difficult it seems we make the simple, everyday transactions of life. Organizational bigness breeds bureaucracy which by its nature breeds complexity in language, process and simple human regulations. Someone I know broke a finger on Saturday and spent the next four days beating his way through emergency rooms, HMO's policies and requirements, and work place procedures, before getting approval to see a physician whose first question was "Why did you wait so long?"

And so we react: we try to simplify things... like Fulgham. And sometimes we over-react by refusing to take seriously the full complexity of the problems facing us. It was Alfred North Whitehead, I believe, who said, "Seek simplicity, and then distrust it."

But the point is well taken... Complexity taxes our minds and spirits and prevents us from coming to grips with things... Most of what is important is not terribly complicated, and the same is true of religion.

Hugh T. Kerr, Senior Editor of Theology Today observed that "there are times, and perhaps this is one of them, when it is salutary to be reminded that we may make the gospel more complicated than necessary." [April, 1989, p. 1] Kerr cites a sermon he heard in a Baptist Church in Manhattan in which the preacher said, "Jesus lives. He lives in your good deeds. He lives in your love," and asks the question that has bothered thoughtful people... "whether we can pack all the theological baggage of the centuries into such compact spaces without doing historical and intellectual violence to the Christian faith." [p. 2]

Now - given the dangers of over-simplification and given the very real danger you can do to a big piece of merchandise if you try to cram and squeeze it into too small a container, my proposal is that one New Testament writer in particular, would come down on the side of a more simple gospel - namely John the Evangelist.

It was St. Jerome, 4th century, who first observed that the author of the Gospel According to John seems to want to reduce the religion of Jesus Christ to one word - love. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son," John wrote it. It is in John's Gospel that Jesus washes the disciple's feet and tells them to love one another, as he has loved them. John's presentation of Jesus celebrates Jesus' love for the disciples: the new covenant of love established by his own death and the new commandment to love one another. Later, after he has lived a few more decades and near the end of his own life, John is writing letters to Christian churches, and he is still at it. "Little children, let us love one another, for love is of God." And here, at the center, at the table of the Last Supper, this very simple admonition. "By this all will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." ... Not by your power, wealth, the beauty of your buildings, music, vestments, not even by the brilliance of your theology, your persuasive sermons and books... but by your love for one another... by this the world is going to know that you are my disciples.

You might say that it's all he ever specifically asked us to do, to love one another. Augustine caught the spirit of it when he said that the essence of Christian morality can be expressed as, "Love and do as you please." It's as simple as that and just as difficult as Fulghum's "clean up your own mess."

The fact of the matter is that what the world has seen when it looked at the friends of Jesus was not always very attractive. The church of Christ has been an embarrassingly human institution in history and it still is. When you visit Scotland you know with a terrible clarity that the

friends of Jesus have been willing to dispatch one another over almost any issue. St. Andrews, site of the oldest University in Great Britain, as well as the Royal and Ancient Golf Club, is also where the first Protestant martyrs were burned at the stake, and where the Protestants sneaked into the castle and murdered Cardinal Beaton and hung his body over the wall for all to see. "By this all will know...?" The tragedy of Northern Ireland is not at all a religious conflict these days, but the combatants are still identified ecclesiastically, and both sides use extremist Protestant and Catholic rhetoric to enflame their respective constituencies. Reactionary Protestant ministers, usurping the name Presbyterian, are among the least helpful and most tragic figures in that sad scenario. "By this all will know?"

Families, of course, can fight better than anyone, and the religious landscape of our culture is still characterized by competition, suspicion, hostility, far more than cooperation, mutuality, cordiality, not to mention love. We can't even break the bread and share the cup of communion with one another. "By this all will know?"

Is it any wonder that all do not know? In C. S. Lewis's Screwtype Letters, from a Senior to a Junior devil on the topic of winning back the soul of a man who seems to be slipping into faith, Satan urges his lieutenant to use the church - "lean heavily on the people he sees in the pews - the ones he is now supposed to love - the ones that sing out of tune, whose boots squeak, have double chins and wear odd clothes. Work hard on the disappointment which is certainly coming during his first few weeks as a churchman." Later on Satan returns to the topic... "count on church people to argue over and finally to hate one another, not over doctrine, but over candles and clothes and what not." [p. 16, 84]

It may be a very simple imperative, but the truth of the matter is that we have not found it easy to love one another in the church, and perhaps the reason is that we have not found it easy to love at all. Jesus kneeling before his disciples, washing their feet, ordering them to imitate him by loving one another and then saying that all will know who they are, may seem the very picture of simplicity. But the fact of the matter is that it was one of the most radical things he ever said. The fact is that he was turning upside down the very structure of human relations which had guided humankind from the beginning of time. The fact of the matter is that when Jesus asks us to love one another - without qualifying it somehow, without saying anything else - he is, in fact, proposing something startling and new and revolutionary, in the first century and in the twentieth century.

His command falls on deaf ears, the late Carlyle Marney used to teach, because we don't use the same grammar. We have, in American culture, replaced the primal verb "to be" - with "to do" and "to have." The essence of a person in Western culture, said Marney, is not in his or her existence, being itself, but rather in what he or she does and has. Jesus, on the other hand, is asking his people to love one another, simply for the sake of love. Furthermore, that's the way he lived - by loving people who had very little to commend themselves, welcoming all sorts of people into his circle of friends.

We are utilitarians at heart. The value of a person is based on his or her utility. So deeply is this a part of the way we think that even in love, we value utility, what we will get in return. It turns people into objects, this way of thinking does. It makes us stingy lovers, prudent, careful lovers. We love those who are lovable, those who appeal to us.

The tragedy is that people need love precisely when they are most unlovable. Every parent knows that a child needs love at just that time when he and she is least attractive. If your love is dispensed on the basis of the utility of the other, you aren't going to be much of a lover. If you love only those who measure up, meet your standards, deserve your love, you aren't going to love much. The simple fact is that if your love depends on anything in the other, the potential object of your love, you'll probably find enough about the other that is unattractive, undeserving, to justify withholding your love, saving it for a better day. That's what happens to many of us, I fear. We shrivel up and die emotionally waiting for someone or something to come along and be deserving of our love.

When Jesus ordered his disciples to love one another and then said the world would know who they are by the quality of their relationship - he was not only proposing a method of communicating the gospel to the world, he was in fact telling them how to participate in their own salvation.

Reuel Howe once wrote, very wisely, that when people asked him where to find love he always said, "You will find love not by looking for it, but by giving it away." And then he said something which brought him very close to that essence of the truth lived by Jesus. "If someone asks me where to find God, I tell them to go find someone to love." [Reul L. Howe, Herein is Love, p. 45 ff]

We know intuitively the power of it, sometimes negatively, some of the most tragic problems we face are at least in part a result of love unexpressed, withheld... It doesn't take long talking to the homeless to discover that if love and acceptance are withheld long enough the result is a heart so broken it can no longer love or trust or care. A counselor at Genesis House, a facility which helps women out of the abyss of prostitution, says that most of the women "enter prostitution between the ages of 14 and 16; 70% to 80% are victims of incest. They enter life with low self-esteem, or no self-confidence, no job skills, and minimal education. Many become substance addicts and live in an abusive relationship with a pimp." Are there alternatives? Genesis House thinks so. The counselor wrote, "Perhaps the greatest gift anyone can give is unconditional love. My work at Genesis House has taught me that change is possible if honest, caring love supports it." [The Christian Century, 4/19/89, "Loving a Prostitute," Judith Hahn]

Love transforms. Love heals. Love saves. Love imparts God. That's Gospel. It's that simple.

Paul Tillich, whose theology is difficult and complex, preached sermons that were elegantly simple. In one, based on our text today, he simply told the story of Elsa Brandstrom, daughter of the Swedish Ambassador to Russia who gave her life to the human treatment of prisoners during World War I, and then afterward to war orphans. Tillich wrote, "We

never had a theological conversation. It was unnecessary. She made God transparent in every moment." [The New Being, p. 28]

And so Malcolm Muggeridge found faith and became a believer when he observed Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Sent to India to do an interview for the BBC, Muggeridge, a life-long skeptic, who had heard every conceivable intellectual argument for the faith, was so taken by her unconditional love for the dying on the streets of Calcutta, that he began a pilgrimage that brought him to full Christian faith. About Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying, he wrote that it "is overflowing with love, as one senses immediately. This love is luminous, like the haloes artists have seen and made visible around the heads of the saints." [Something Beautiful for God, p. 44]

It can be stated with sublime simplicity - love one another... by this all will know that you are my disciples.

Perhaps it's not so complicated after all. Perhaps it's not at all a matter of understanding it, but simply doing it.

Maybe it begins very simply by learning how to say I love you. If that's too difficult to manage, perhaps you can say "I care about you... you matter to me... tell me how it is with you, tell me your hurts and your joys, tell me what makes you weep and laugh."

Maybe it begins with the honest acknowledgment that we are stingy lovers, that we evaluate first, very carefully, and that few people make the grade.

And maybe it begins with the honest acknowledgment that if love depends on deserving, there aren't many people who are going to find us loveable.

"How," someone asked after the early service, "am I supposed to do it?"

Well, it starts I believe, with Gospel; with the good news that someone loves us. Regardless of our utility, attractiveness, regardless even of our sin, we are loved. God, in Jesus Christ has loved us.

And maybe it begins simply when we hear what he said... "love one another,"... and then go out and do it: find love by giving ours away... and discover something else, namely that when we find someone to love, we encounter God.

It was indeed, one of the simplest things he ever said, one of the few specific things he asked us to do. It can revolutionize your life and save your soul in the bargain. It will also, he promised, help in his task of recreating the world.

"Love one another... By this all will know."

Amen.